

Artist Statement

This exhibition is about looking back, *mequándumoowin*, which means memory in my maternal language, Saulteaux. The title, "Looking for the Shaman" is based on a mixed-media self-portrait in which my right hand points to a blue area, my spirit colour. Also included in the show are works created between 2009 and 2018 that feature imagery related to shamanism which has always played an important role in healing, naming and spiritual leadership that influences our comportment in both public and personal spaces.

These drawings, paintings and installations are about experiences that shaped my life growing up in my community of Sandy Bay First Nation in southern Manitoba. Assembled together they become a mnemonic device that maps what the body remembers through the senses and dreams. The more recent works on mylar and canvas reflect recent investigations into current environmental issues of water protection.

My perspective clearly signifies an epistemological difference from Judeo-Christian modernity. As an *Anishnabe*, memory is a phenomena experienced through magic and reality, the intersection of shamanism and mythology rather than rationalism. It should be noted that as earth-centered people, we believe that animals are relatives much like the seven grandfathers with their teachings: eagle/love, wolf/humility, beaver/wisdom, bear/courage, turtle/truth, buffalo/respect and sabe/honesty.

Moreover, the weather, the atmosphere of a place and time, can be the inspiration and sanction for a spirit name. Spring is generally heralded by the arrival of young thunderbirds that create havoc when their lightning pierces the dark clouds. As children our mother would offer tobacco to appease them. These rituals play an important role in keeping our relationship with nature alive and meaningful. The thunderers and their helpers make their presence known by the different sounds they create during a storm. Very often this is the descriptive source for spirit names for people's guidance and protection. As an example, mine is Blue Thunder, a name used primarily during prayer, ritual and ceremony.

Proximity to this spiritual and cultural significance is what frames this work. Nonetheless, colonization, with its conflicting distractions of assimilation and appropriation is still very much a work in progress in view of the findings and recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Its inquiry into the cultural genocidal apparatus of the Residential School System is very much an on-going self-examination of the damage done to our earth-centred spirituality.

The Sundance and Potlatch were outlawed by Parliament between 1885 and 1951. As a teenager, a stern lecture from a priest about the sin of worshipping false gods at the Sundance was long a source of humiliation and conflict. Today, these two spiritual traditions and calendars, winter and summer solstices, are an inspiration. Growing up with both narratives was encouraged by our parents and medicine

people allowing us to witness what our ancestors had left for us in order to lead a good life. Traditional knowledge includes shape shifting, conjuring, transforming, healing and naming which can leave a shaman vulnerable. They intercede with mythological guardians as well as ancestors on behalf of those who seek their assistance.

Water, the symbol of life in *Anishnabe* mythology is connected to our grandmothers, mothers, sisters and wives. Idle No More was founded by women in 2012 and became a movement across the whole of Turtle Island championing Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protection from oil and gas pipelines and fracking which uses large amounts of chemically treated water to release gas causing destabilization of the earth. *Nebé*, water, sustains life. A ritual learned while growing up in Sandy Bay involved walking along the shore of Lake Manitoba after church. If accompanied by my brothers, not a word was spoken. The long, silent walk was considered helpful in releasing trauma during difficult times. Today, as everyone is aware, water is under threat everywhere. The Dakota have given the name blacksnake to the network of pipelines that transverse Turtle Island in all four directions.

As an abstraction, meditation as a thought process can reveal a path to a world of colour and images where the shaman travels the path of the Morningstar: rising with the sun at dawn and perhaps singing at dusk. Traditionally, this is considered as spending the entire day with the Creator. Abstraction in painting can also be meditative. It can intuitively expose a level of vulnerability during the creative process. Paintings done during this personal journey of events have helped shape my spiritual life and given me freedom to create. Some of the meditative shamans in the paintings appear as androgynous figures, some holding an eagle feather and one in particular that is seemingly holding a talkingstick, an ancient and powerful object designating who has the right to speak.

To allow oneself to be vulnerable in the service of others is one of the warmest attributes of a shaman. Some heal by dreaming, some by the laying of hands and smudging using traditional medicines cedar, sage, sweetgrass and tobacco. They dream in colour and at differing levels of astral travel. Some will ask that when you go walking with them to throw a piece of wood into a lake or river and will tell you that your energy will always be there.

Transformative images of a shaman as a horse is my memory of horses with decorated blinders being led into the Sundance lodge dancing to the drums, rattles and eagle whistles of the dancers. The installations, with their traditional companion objects, a *parflèche* and hand drum, recall teepee linings and ceremonial drapes that served interior functions. The monochromatic black and white portraits with their gestural immediacy portray a state of transparency and otherness.

“Looking for the Shaman” is the result of a life-long fascination of their extraordinary skills as seers, healers, name givers, visionaries and keepers of

traditional knowledge, *uhdesókun*. Searching for what is left after living in a secular urban environment for decades has left memories of my brothers and I as teenagers listening to the ceremonial drumming and singing of the Powwow. Today, they are treasured memories of solace and pride.